

Fredric Jameson
“Third-World Literature
in the Era of Multinational Capitalism”

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you agree with the three-world argument? And Jameson's definition of the third world vs. the first world?
2. How does Jameson define national allegory? Why does he connect national allegory to cultural revolution?
3. In what ways can we relate his views on national allegory to Homi Bhabha's nation as narration?

Main argument: ““all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical, and in a very specific way they are to be read as what I will call **national** allegories.”” (pp. 545-56)

Outline:

1. Introduction: defines literary value, canon and its limitations, our fragmentary reading subjects, and the 'third-world'
 - A. Refuses to see the third-world literature as writings “like” the canonical ones.
 - B. “Indeed our want of sympathy for these often unmodern third-world texts is itself frequently but a disguise for some deeper fear of the affluent life that still as little in common with daily life in the American suburb” (542).
 - C. The Other reader – between Western readers and the alien text
 - D. Fragmented self – We need to recognize that we are fundamentally fragmented; “confront honestly the fact of fragmentation on a global scale; it is a confrontation with which we can here at least make a cultural beginning” (543).
 - E. “**third-world**” – used in a descriptive sense. P. 554 not orientalism, but an effort to remind the American public of “the radical different of other national institutions.”
2. The third world and its national allegory – different modes of production in Asia, Africa and Latin America
 - A. “They are all in various ways locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism—a cultural struggle that is itself a reflexion of the economic situation of such areas in their penetration by various stages of capital, or as it is sometimes euphemistically termed, of modernization.”
 - B. **National allegory**: “all third-world texts are necessarily . . . allegorical, and in a very specific way they are to be read as what I will call **national** allegories....or particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel....The story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society.” (545-46)
 - C. no radical split between the public and the private p. 545 (*Diary of a Madman* as an example p. 547)
 - D. **radical difference between the East and the West**: e.g. the libidinal dimension of the story --
the very different “relationship between the libidinal and the political components of individual and social experience” in the first and third worlds.
 - a. **West**—political commitment re-psychologized and accounted for in

terms of the subjective dynamics of resentment or authoritarian personality;

- b. **East** – libidinal read in primarily political and social terms. (e.g. Diary – cannibalism as a social nightmare; two endings – one in a universal cannibalism, and the other, in the realm of illusion and oblivion—with the protagonist taking up an official post. 553)

E. **the structure of allegory** – p. 549

- a. “our traditional concept of **allegory**—based, for instance, on stereotypes of Bunyan—is that of an elaborate set of figures and personifications to be read against some one-to-one table of equivalence: this is, so to speak, a one-dimensional view of this signifying process, which might only be set in motion and complexified were we willing to entertain the more alarming notion that such equivalencies are themselves in constant change and transformation at each perpetual present of the text.” 549

Today’s -- “the allegorical spirit is profoundly discontinuous, a matter of breaks and heterogeneities, of the multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogenous representation of the symbol.” (550 – e.g. Ah Q is China, but the people around him is, too.)

- F. **third-world intellectuals’** position – always in one way or another political. **First-world intellectuals:** “We have allowed ourselves ... to restrict our consciousness of our life’s work to the narrowest professional or bureaucratic terms, thereby encouraging in ourselves a special sense of subalternity and guilt. (553)

- **cultural revolution** – projecting the subalternity outward and resolve it.
p. 552 – 1) “subalternity,” namely the feelings of mental inferiority and habits of subservience and obedience which necessarily and structurally develop in situations of domination—most dramatically in the experience of colonized peoples.
2) “Subalternity is not in that sense a psychological matter, although it governs psychologies; and I suppose that the strategic choice of the term “cultural” aims precisely at restructuring that view of the problem and projecting it outwards into the realm of objective or collective spirit in some non-psychological, but also non-reductionist or non-economistic materialist fashion. When a psychic structure is objectively determined by economic and political relationships, it cannot be dealt with by means of purely psychological therapies; yet it equally cannot be dealt with by means of purely objective transformations of the economic and political situation itself, since the habits remain and exercise a baleful and crippling residual effect. This is a more dramatic form of that old mystery, the unity of theory and practice; and it is specifically in the context of this problem of cultural revolution (now so strange and alien to us) that the achievements and failures of third-world intellectuals, writers and artists must be placed if their concrete meaning is to be grasped.” (552-53)

- 3) **a dynamic view of culture** –emerging culture → cultural patterns (reified). P. 554

- 4) cultural identity – not fixed, but strategic usages p. 554

G. the story’s double resolution

The example of Ousmane Sembene. *Xala; The Money Order*

Conclusion: the relationship between **Master and Slave** pp. 561 -62

- A. contemporary western literature—use of the mechanism of self-referentiality.
- B. In the West—allegory as in disrepute, while the third world nations, it is inescapable.
- C. This difference can be understood in terms of “situational consciousness,” or Master-Slave relationship. “... only the slave knows what reality and the resistance of matter really are; only the slave can attain some true materialistic consciousness of his situation.”

Ref. Imre Szeman. “Who’s Afraid of **National Allegory**? **Jameson**, Literary Criticism, Globalization”

<http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~global/ga/100.3szeman.pdf>

Main argument: (p. 3) “totality appears as the possibility of metacommentary—not as a secondary step in interpretation but as a condition of interpretation per se; and as I argue here, what **national allegory** itself names are the conditions of possibility of metacommentary at the present time. The question I pursue, then, is the relationship of **allegory (as a mode of interpretation)** to the nation (as a specific kind of sociopolitical problematic) and what this relationship entails for a global or transnational literary or cultural criticism.

1. **Jameson**’s development of the concept of **national allegory** in “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” and in **Jameson**’s own work. → “**National allegory** names a possibility and a limit for texts that **Jameson** first sees in the fiction of Wyndham Lewis, then in third world texts, and finally, as a condition of contemporary cultural production as such.”
2. the relationship between nation and **allegory** in **Jameson**’s recent writings on globalization --

The nation stands for three things in **Jameson**’s recent reflections on globalization.

1. It identifies, first, the possibility of other modes of social life that are organized in strikingly different ways than the American-led “culture-ideology of consumption.” Other “**national** situations” offer models of different forms of collective and social life—not, it is important to add, in the form of “traditional” or “pre-lapsarian” modes of social being, but in the form of “rather recent and successful accommodations of the old institutions to modern technology.”
- 2.. Second, the nation is the name for a frankly utopic space that designates “whatever programmes and representations express, in however distorted or unconscious a fashion, the demands of a collective life to come, and identify social collectivity as the crucial centre of any truly progressive and innovative political response to globalization.” These words at the end of “Globalization and Political Strategy” are actually meant to define the word utopian rather than nation. The link between the two terms is made possible in a note that appears a few pages earlier, where **Jameson** claims that “the words ‘nationalism’ and ‘nationalist’ have always been ambiguous, misleading, perhaps even dangerous. The positive or ‘good’ nationalism I have in mind involves what Henri Lefebvre liked to call ‘the great collective project,’ and takes the form of the attempt to construct a nation.”⁶⁷

3) Finally, **Jameson** discusses the nation not in order to settle the case either for or against globalization—rejecting, for instance, the false universality of the “American way of life” in favor of one of so many other (rapidly evaporating) national models, which themselves have never yet yielded positive social alternatives—“but rather to intensify their incompatibility and opposition such that we can live this particular contradiction as our own historic form of Hegel’s unhappy consciousness.” If “Globalization and Political Strategy” ends with a discussion of utopia, “Notes on Globalization” ends with a discussion of the necessity of the dialectic, and of the Hegelian dialectic in particular. The aim of the dialectic is to understand phenomena in order, finally, to locate the contradictions behind them: in Hegel’s Logic, the discovery of the Identity of identity and nonidentity that reveals Opposition as Contradiction. But this is not the final moment: “Contradiction then passes over into its Ground, into what I would call the situation itself, the aerial view or the map of the totality in which things happen and History takes place.”⁶⁹ Such a map of the moment when the nation is thought to have been superseded once and for all can only be produced if the nation, the Ground of an earlier moment, is put into play in the dialectic rather than suspended from the outset.

Ref. M. Sprinker “The National Question: Said, Ahmad, Jameson”